

Several local and federal agencies took another step in protecting America's Everglades by releasing an insect reared to combat the invasive Brazilian peppertree. These insects, known as thrips, were developed as part of a partnership between several federal and state government agencies to combat invasive plants in the South Florida ecosystem. These agencies include the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD), the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), Florida Department of Environmental Protection, the National Park Service, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS) and the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS).

"Floridians have invested billions to restore and protect our Everglades for future generations," said **SFWMD Governing Board Member Ron Bergeron** at the thrips release event today at Tree Tops Park in Davie. "Using biological controls like this insect to control the spread of invasive plants is using the tools Mother Nature herself has given us to protect that investment in the Everglades."

Officials from several partner agencies at the thrips release event discussed how biological methods like the use of insects are being used to manage the spread of invasive plants in South Florida such as melaleuca and lygodium.

"Agricultural and natural systems are overrun with non-native invasive species, costing the public hundreds of millions of dollars each year. Finding sustainable, cost-effective and safe methods of pest control is badly needed," said **Dr. Gregory Wheeler, Research Entomologist at the USDA Agricultural Research Service**. "Our goal is to develop biological solutions to weed out problems in natural and agricultural systems."

At this event, officials released dozens of vials containing thrips (*Pseudophilothrips ichini*) insects that are native to Brazil and feed on the Brazilian peppertree. USDA researchers anticipate this insect will reduce the growth of this invasive plant by 80 percent without negatively affecting native Florida plants and wildlife.

"University of Florida researchers worked as a team to study and gain approval for the release of specialized insects that will manage the invasive Brazilian

peppertree," said **Ronald Cave, Professor and Director for UF/IFAS Indian River Research and Education Center.**

**Pedro Ramos, Superintendent of Everglades and Dry Tortugas National Parks** added, "The invasive species problem we face threatens the delicate and important Everglades ecosystem. Efforts like this are critical in our fight to ensure our environment will be healthy and sustainable in the long term."

First introduced to Florida in the 1800s as an ornamental tree, the Brazilian peppertree is one of the most aggressive, non-native plants in Florida, with more than 700,000 acres statewide, including portions of America's Everglades, impacted. Brazilian peppertree creates a dense canopy that crowds out native plants and creates poor habitat for native wildlife.

After the release event, officials also toured the USDA's Invasive Plant Research Laboratory at 3225 College Road in Davie, FL. This facility was built by the USACE and is jointly operated by SFWMD in cooperation with the USDA. The lab rears insects such as the thrips that are successfully controlling invasive species in South Florida.

"Invasive species management is a key part of Everglades Restoration," said **Lt. Col. Jennifer Reynolds, USACE Deputy Commander for South Florida.** "The construction of the research and quarantine facility was the first project component of the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan to be completed. The ability to conduct research, rear biocontrol insects and pass the rigorous process for release approval is critically important. Without the tools to manage invasive species, such as the biocontrols we are releasing today, we cannot accomplish Everglades Restoration."

**Kipp Frohlich, Director of the FWC's Division of Habitat and Species Conservation,** added, "The FWC is proud to be a part of this project and we're dedicated to continued work with our partners to find innovative ways to eliminate invasive nonnative plants in our state."